



Unknowing: The Work of Modernist Fiction

Philip Weinstein

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Philip Weinstein explores the modernist commitment to "unknowing" by addressing the work of three supreme experimental writers: Franz Kafka, Marcel Proust, and William Faulkner. In their novels, the narrative props that support the drama of coming to know are refused. When space turns uncanny rather than lawful, when time ceases to be linear and progressive, objects and others become unfamiliar. So does the subject seeking to know them. Weinstein argues that modernist texts work, by way of surprise and arrest, to subvert the familiarity and narrative progression intrinsic to realist fiction. Rather than staging the drama of coming to know, they stage the drama of coming to unknow. The signature move of modernism is shock, just as resolution is the trademark of realism. Kafka, Proust, and Faulkner wrought their most compelling experimental effects by undermining an earlier Enlightenment project of knowing. Weinstein draws on major Enlightenment thinkers to identify constituent components of the narrative of "coming to know"-the progressive narrative underwriting two centuries of Western realist fiction. The book proceeds by framing modernist unknowing between prior practices of realist knowing, on the one hand, and, on the other, certain later practices-postmodern and postcolonial-that move beyond knowing altogether. In so doing, Weinstein proposes a metahistory of the Western novel, from Daniel Defoe to Toni Morrison.

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